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Audit shows high price for architect of ECC site

Its cost is \$500,000 above the low bidder

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A special committee selecting the architect for a new Erie Community College academic building chose a firm that could cost at least \$500,000 more than the least expensive finalist, county auditors say.

Of the seven firms that made the shortlist, Kideney Architects PC offered prices that made it more expensive than all but one, the auditors said. Still, the review panel and later the ECC board of trustees selected Kideney.

The auditors did not indicate that there had been favoritism. They did say, however, that with the lack of documentation backing up the college's decision, they could not state that the selection of Kideney had been proper.

The chairwoman of the trustees and the review panel, Patricia A. Krzesinski, said the auditors did not go deeply enough into the prices that each firm quoted for the numerous tasks involved with the construction project.

"One may have quoted a particular price," she said, "but it didn't include some things that another firm did include." Krzesinski said she's confident the ECC trustees selected the best firm — with prices in line with the others.

If a final contract is signed, Kideney would design a \$30 million project to build the first new academic structure in decades for

ECC's North Campus in Amherst. However, the entire \$30 million has yet to be arranged, and no architect's contract has reached the County Legislature.

Further, some political figures in Buffalo prefer that ECC build its health sciences building at the City Campus. The Buffalo Common Council, for example, recently adopted a statement urging ECC trustees to build downtown.

County Executive Chris Collins remains committed to the Amherst site. So do a number of county lawmakers from the suburbs who, noting years of neglect at the Amherst campus, approved Collins' call to set aside \$7.5 million for the structure.

The ECC Foundation would raise another \$7.5 million for construction. The college expects state government to provide the final \$15 million, but groundbreaking could be years off.

County Comptroller Mark C. Poloncarz's auditors said they examined the Kideney selection after a caller to their "tip line" hinted at impropriety. The auditors said they were quickly struck by the lack of documents to support the decision.

In their report, they noted that it was difficult to calculate an apples-to-apples price comparison among the final seven firms. But they said county officials in past years could at least present the scoring sheets and summaries they completed in grading firms for prices, qualifications and ideas.

Like the Collins team, the auditors would not state the potential value of Kideney's contract because the full scope of the architect's services has not yet been decided. So it is difficult to say whether \$500,000 is a small or large percentage of the overall cost for the architect on this job. Collins' director of real estate, Michelle A. Mazzone, acknowledged in a letter to the auditors that no score sheets or meeting minutes were available, "nor is there any requirement that minutes be taken," she said.

Mazzone told them that Collins could have selected any of the 43 preapproved firms that he can turn to for such work, Kideney being one. But the Collins team agreed to issue a "request for qualifications" to dozens of architectural firms at the urging of ECC officials.

The college does not own its campus land or its buildings. County government owns them, so the college is working with the county executive's staff to arrange the new space for students considering careers in dentistry and medicine.

Krzesinski was one of five voting members on the special review panel, which included another college trustee, an employee from ECC's buildings and grounds unit, and two county government employees familiar with public works projects. Mazzone was a nonvoting member. So was ECC President Jack F. Quinn Jr.

Krzesinski said that once the members fully examined the different prices quoted for various services or tasks, all seven finalists appeared to be within the same range.

"When we sat down after all the interviews to analyze the presentations and the financials, it basically came down to, of the seven, they were all in the same ballpark," Krzesinski said. "If one appeared cheaper, it was because they had add-on costs for other things. And Michelle told us they were also negotiable."

Krzesinski added that the seven finalists “all did a great job. But Kideney had some novel ideas, and their ideas about what the positioning of the building could do for the whole campus, and their rerouting of the traffic pattern to give it more of a campus appearance, they really stood out.”

She said the five voting members then ranked their top three architects. All five placed Kideney atop their lists, she said.

Another top contender was the EI Team, whose principal, Hormoz Mansouri, is a college trustee. As a result, trustees were unwilling to select the EI Team for the project.

“We couldn’t give it to Hormoz,” a trustee who asked to remain unidentified said in April. “It would have killed the whole project because of public perception. How could we justify to the public that one of our own board members got a \$30 million project?”